Feeling for the Edge of your Imagination: finding ways not to call the police

Dear friends, family, acquaintances and people with whom I share house party dance floors and supermarket lines,

A few weeks ago, an acquaintance of mine attended a police lineup, pointed at someone, and sent them to jail or prison. Last night, a friend's roommate called the cops about something happening outside, and the effect of that action was a young man getting tasered.

So I've decided to write you a letter. All of you, but *especially* those of you who, like myself and the two people mentioned above, are white and/or grew up middle class and/or didn't grow up in NYC. I'm writing to you, also, if you've smiled your way out of a speeding ticket, if you've been most afraid of cops at mass protests, or if you generally feel safer when you see police around. If these things are true for you, it's possible that you are more distanced from the real impact of policing on low-income communities of color. But whether people in your life experience those impacts regularly or not, whether you've spent a night in jail, done work to support political prisoners, or haven't thought much about police brutality since Sean Bell… if you hold a commitment to making the world a better place, I'm writing to you, because there's work to be done.

I, and many people I know, want to see a world without prisons, we want the whole industry of keeping people in cages (the Prison Industrial Complex) abolished, we want no more police.* We want a world where responses to harm are community-based, transformative and actually create safety. Where that safety comes from strengthening relations of community, where interpersonal violence dissolves along with the structural violence that facilitates it.

Many of us don't believe in calling the police. Right now, right here, even before we've sufficiently built all the alternative structures for responding to harm. Both in an attempt to create the world we want to live in, and/but also because the impact of prisons and policing is brutal, oppressive, racist, traumatic. We see almost no good coming of it, certainly no transformation, no making things better. We don't trust police, we don't think of them as the "good guys," and we don't think calling them is going to change anything.

After the above-mentioned acquaintance pointed out the person in the lineup, my partner and I took a long walk. Neither of us could imagine sending someone to jail or prison, and certainly not for the act in question (a mugging). We were shaken, appalled, angry. How could he do that? How could he send someone into a cage, especially when no one's safety was being threatened in that moment – when he (the finger-pointer) wasn't backed into a corner by the situation? It felt crystal clear to us how little positive impact this will have on our world, on the person who is now going to be in jail, on the woman who was mugged. It won't fix anything, and for the person going to jail things are probably just going to get a lot worse. Prison causes harm: people locked up are subjected to abuse, assault, humiliation and torture. Thinking through the possible consequences, we wondered if the man who our acquaintance had pointed to had immigration papers. What will happen to the people who might rely on him for support or resources? Whose heart is being broken right now?

As we paced in the cold night, we moved through our questions, anger and frustration. We thought about how everyone we know—even in a community that mostly wants a world without prisons—has had different experiences with harm and violence, different experiences with police, and, most likely, has a different "threshold" at which they can imagine *not* calling the police.

I believe in a world without prisons. I've spent some time and effort working to address harm through non-state responses that are meant to create real change (for example, addressing partner abuse through facilitating a community-based accountability circle). However, as the conversation my partner and I were having turned to ourselves, our safety, and our worst nightmares, I wondered, in what situation might I find myself calling the police? I acknowledged that there would be situations in which I might call the cops because I haven't yet imagined an alternative. I half-suggested we go down that road: finding those worst-case scenarios, and then starting to envision alternative responses. We didn't have it in us that night, but something about it seemed smart—like knowing how to stop-drop-and-roll in a fire.

We live in a world that's deeply damaged by policing, in which immediate and effective community-based responses don't necessarily exist, or we don't know how to find/create them. Our imaginations have atrophied, our resourcefulness has withered. There are moments when immediate intervention will save someone's life, and it needs to be fast, and the readily available structure for that immediate intervention is the police.

We live in a world in which we can feel deeply powerless or afraid. It feels terrible when we, or the people we care about, get hurt or experience harm. When I think of the moments in which I could possibly imagine calling the police, I think of people I love, and of things I hope they never experience. Why do we feel afraid? Sometimes we feel afraid because we have experienced harm, because we have experienced trauma.

Sometimes we also feel afraid because we have bought into aspects of racism, classism, and media-perpetuated images of danger. Sometimes it's the complex combination of all these things—imagination, memory, and prejudice. For women, our experiences with physical safety are complex and painful—women in my life have understandably chosen and sought police intervention when it has seemed like the only available safety measure in situations of interpersonal or sexual abuse. So given these complicated realities, how can we assure that if police are called it's an active, intentional and reluctant choice, not a knee-jerk reaction? What can we do to push ourselves further, to take another step towards a world without prisons, without police, and without the racism and brutality they reproduce?

I started to think about the choking posters in restaurants. I've never done the Heimlich maneuver, and it's not something I can practice on someone unless they're actually choking. I can't know how it feels to do it, or if it will really work, or if I'll have the confidence to pull it off. But I've taken first aid classes, and I can feel under my rib cage for my diaphragm, and I stare absentmindedly at those restaurant posters all the time. I started to think about practice and preparation, about pre-thinking our possible responses. Theoretically, if someone beside me in a restaurant starts choking, I'll feel brave, my mind will be clear, and I'll remember what I've thought through. Hopefully my response will be helpful, instead of causing additional harm.

So, when that roommate of my friend called the police and a young person got tasered, I wondered if she'd ever thought about *not calling* them before. In a moment of fear or confusion, we default to what we've practiced. Did she have practice *not* calling the police? Probably not. What would it take for her to do something different next time? Most likely, she thought someone was in danger and that she was helping. Maybe whatever was happening outside her window was loud and it was scaring her and the only thing her sleepy brain could think to do was dial 911. Maybe she doesn't know her neighbors. Maybe the only alternative she could imagine was running outside in her nightgown, which didn't feel safe or useful. Maybe her experiences with police have felt orderly and professional, and her first association is one of trust, not of violence and abuse. Whether these things are understandable or not, when you call the cops, you participate in a regime of violence against poor and working class people of color in this city. It's part of gentrification, it's part of racism and it's part of genocide. If we're calling the police, we're voting for that system—instead of putting time and effort into creating real and new responses to harm and engaging with the people around us in that process. Next time, how can you do differently? I believe we can teach ourselves skills, do some unlearning, and find ways to *not call* the police next time. This letter isn't about someday-visions, this letter is about what you're going to do tomorrow.

So whether this is all pretty new for you, or you've heard this one before, or you think of yourself as a prison abolitionist, I have a suggestion: I think we all need to *think through* not calling the cops. We need to explore our own personal thresholds, we need to create the Heimlich Maneuver posters that will inspire us to be brave, avoid knee-jerk dialing 911, and take the steps to create the alternative responses we wish were more common, more available.

In this spirit, there are some questions and activities below. Please do them soon—this weekend, tomorrow, tonight. Make a little window of time. Don't wait for some magical day when there's nothing left to read or clean or check off your "to do" list. Think about it this way: you could save a life.

With love and respect,

Caroline

Suggested Activities

1. Read a poem, article or story you haven't read before about prison/prison abolition, policing/police brutality, or alternative responses to harm. Then share the article with a friend. (Some resources and articles are listed at the end of this essay).

2. Find someone you can talk with about heavy stuff, or grab a pen and paper.
Ask yourself:

> Have you ever called the police?

- Why?
- What did you gain from calling the police?
- Do you know what the result of your call was for the other people in the situation?

> Have you ever chosen not to call the police when it seemed like an option?

- Why didn't you call them?
- Did you find an alternative response?
- What did you gain from that response?
- Do you know what the effect of that response was for the other people in the situation?

> Feel for the edge of your own police-calling "threshold":

- In what situations can you not even imagine calling the police? What is it that seems obvious to you to do instead?
- Are there any situations in which you feel like it's necessary to call the police?
- Name the situation (or type of situation) in which you think you would call the police, where that response is the only thing you can imagine doing, or would be automatic.
- Sit with that threshold for a minute. Imagine the creative response that would allow you to move that threshold back a bit and generate a more creative, community-based response. What would you need? Who would be involved? How can you start to build that possibility?

> Are there situations where you and your friend disagree on whether or not you would call the police? What can you learn from your friend? What can you push them on?

> Would you call the cops on an institution (like a loud business, a safety violation at a school, etc)? Do you think this is different? How? What might alternative responses look like for you?

> What about times when you're a bystander to police activity? What do you do when you see a cop stop someone on your block? Think through an action plan for spontaneous cop-watching and for ways you can support people who are being detained by the police. For more information about cop-watching, check out:

http://mxgm.org/web/people-s-self-defense-campaign-psdc/mxgm-copwatch-video.html and http://www.berkeleycopwatch.org/

3. Collaborate and Share: Pass this letter along. Bring it up over dinner. Ask these questions to your family, friends and roommates. If you have a story of a community-based, non-state response to harm, consider sharing it with the Story Telling Organizing Project: http://www.stopviolenceeveryday.org/have-a-story/ .

4. Keep learning about privileges you may have and the ways they manifest, keep listening and working to be a better ally to the people around you.

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Click here or go to the previous post for Resources, Poems, Stories & Articles

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* If this is a new idea for you, it might seem outrageous. You might be thinking, "Sure, too many people go to jail for nonviolent offenses, but… no prisons at all? What about murderers/rapists/child abusers?" It's a good question, and one that is worth exploring. When I imagine a world without prisons, I see lots of transformation: transformation in the way we prevent harm and build healthy communities, transformation in the way we respond to harm and create safety for each other, and a commitment to supporting the transformation of individuals who have caused harm. There are lots of people who have been thinking hard about this, and there are resources listed at the end of this letter—check them out.

∞ Mar 31st, 2010 at 4:35 pm Twitter / Facebook

Resources, Poems, Stories & Articles

Critical Resistance Statement on **Policing**

Critical Resistance **Vision**

Not So Common **Language**

Stories of community-based responses to harm

Child abuse and social justice

June Jordan's **Poem** about Police Violence

Poem responding to Duke violence

Gender violence and the prison industrial complex

Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) on **anti-violence** and resistance to the prison industrial complex

Building community-based safety for **LGBTSTGNC** people

Prison Activist Resource Center (PARC) **multimedia resource library**

Interview about **immigration and police collaboration**

Angela Y. Davis, ***Are Prisons Obsolete?*** Seven Stories Press, 2003.

Leonard Peltier, ***Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance***. Saint Martin's Griffin, 2000.

Tara Herivel, ***Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money from Mass Incarcerations?*** New Press, 2008.

Elaine Brown, ***The Condemnation of Little B.*** Beacon Press, 2002.

Tanya Erzen: **"Turnstile Jumpers and Broken Windows"** essay from ***Zero Tolerance: Quality of Life and the New Police Brutality in New York City***, edited by Andrea McArdle and Tanya Erzen. New York University Press, 2001.

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Poem about Police Violence

Poem about Police Violence

Tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop

you think the accident rate would lower subsequently?
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby
comes back to my mouth and I am quiet
like Olympian pools from the running
mountainous snows under the sun

sometimes thinking about the 12th House of the Cosmos
or the way your ear ensnares the tip
of my tongue or signs that I have never seen
like DANGER WOMEN WORKING

I lose consciousness of ugly bestial rapid
and repetitive affront as when they tell me
18 cops in order to subdue one man
18 strangled him to death in the ensuing scuffle
(don't you idolize the diction of the powerful: *subdue*
and *scuffle* my oh my) and that the murder
that the killing of Arthur Miller on a Brooklyn
street was just a "justifiable accident" again
(Again)

People been having accidents all over the globe
so long like that I reckon that the only
suitable insurance is a gun
I'm saying war is not to understand or rerun
war is to be fought and won

sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby
blots it out/the bestial but
not too often tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop

you think the accident rate would lower subsequently

- June Jordan -

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